Comments on Gabriel Citron's 'Dreams, Nightmares, and a Defense against Arguments from Evil'

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Marilyn McCord Adams

Gabriel Citron's paper is as bold as it is religiously deep. He puts himself in the company of the rabbis. In imitation of the Deity, and with all due respect, the rabbis were always up for questioning and disputing. So am I. Intriguing and challenging as Citron's argument is, it leaves me with one persistent query.

Citron's dream-argument assumes (indeed, he points to empirical evidence) that qualitatively the same phenomenal contents can be experienced in dreams as in reality (pp.249-252). For the sake of argument, I grant this.

Still, it strikes me, dream scepticism can be taken in two ways.

[1] The first starts with real subjects and posits two different relations that the subjects can have to the phenomenal contents: call them "perceptual-apprehension" and "dream-apprehension." Throughout most of the paper, Citron seems to be operating with this picture (pp.249, 253-256). The real subject S apprehends phenomenal contents PC. What s/he is asked to wonder is whether her/his relation to PC is perceptual apprehension or dream apprehension. Citron argues that even if the perceptual contents PC were horrendous, were S to find out that s/he was only dream-apprehending them, S would be relieved and conclude that apprehending or having apprehended them was "no big deal."

[2] When I get dream-sceptical, however, what I am worrying about is a different picture, which recognizes a single relation of apprehending to phenomenal contents PC, but allows that the same subject can have two ontological statuses: it can exist in reality as a real subject and/or it can exist in the dream as the dream subject (cf. top of p.259, where Citron speaks of "dream-selves"). When the real subject has the apprehension relation to horrendous PC, it really experiences horrors. When the dream subject has the apprehension relation to horrendous PC, the dream subject experiences horrors in the dream. Either way, horrors are experienced in the same sense. Now what dream scepticism gets me wondering is, am I a dream subject, or am I a real subject? On this

second picture, I don't see how it would be reassuring to learn that I am a dream subject, because my relationship to horrors is the same either way. Having a reduced ontological status does not make me any the less an experiencer of horrendous evil. The fact that being a dream-self is a more flimsy ontological status than being a real self cuts no theodical ice, because in relation to God's Reality, even real created selves are "almost nothing." So I am left feeling that even if I am a dream-self, I will still have all of the complaints against God that I had before.

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John Pittard

I am delighted to have the opportunity to join this conversation on Gabriel Citron's very interesting and provocative paper, "Dreams, Nightmares, and a Defense Against Arguments from Evil." Citron argues that for each of us it is epistemically possible that the life we take ourselves to be living is nothing but a dream, and that the real life we will "wake up" to is one that is free of any horrific suffering. Citron thinks that if this possibility were actual, then the apparent horrific evils that we experience or witness others experiencing would not in fact amount to actual horrific evils. Just as we do not typically think that the "suffering" we experience in our nighttime nightmares is especially significant (certainly not in comparison to "real" suffering of our waking life), the pains of the present world would turn out to be trivial should the present world prove to be nothing but a dream. Thus, if the dream scenario is epistemically possible, it is also epistemically possible that there is no horrific evil. And Citron maintains that if it is epistemically possible that there is no horrific evil, then both logical and evidential atheistic arguments from evil fail. In light of the failure of these arguments, Citron urges that it is reasonable to at least *hope* that God exists.

I commend Citron for pursuing an underexplored approach to answering arguments from evil. As he rightly notes, almost all theistic responses to these arguments grant the existence of horrific evils and focus instead on whether God might plausibly have good reasons for permitting horrific evils of the sort we witness. In a creative and lively fashion, Citron departs from this orthodoxy. Ultimately, though, I do not think that Citron's response succeeds as a defense of reasonable theistic hope. There are two reasons for this. First, I think that Citron's argument for the epistemic possibility of the dream hypothesis relies on epistemological presuppositions that are implausible (and even more so conditional on theism). Second, even if the dream hypothesis is epistemically possible in the relevant sense, I do not think that the dream hypothesis is an appropriate object of hope. And if it isn't an appropriate object of hope, then the epistemic possibility of the dream hypothesis cannot help to make theistic hope reasonable. Let me briefly develop each of these points.

I begin with the worries about the epistemological assumptions operative in Citron's argument. Citron argues that for any experience, it is possible for a phenomenally indistinguishable experience to occur in a dream (this is his premise B1), and that if this is true, then it is not possible to know whether one is dreaming or awake (this is his premise B2). It is questionable whether one can legitimately appeal to these premises in any defense of theistic hope. Traditionally, God is thought to be a being who is omniscient or at least not afflicted by unresolvable skeptical worries. But if premises B1 and B2 are not qualified in some way, then they would seem to imply that even God cannot know whether "he" is awake or dreaming. For

whatever experiences God might have at any moment would (according to B1) be phenomenally indistinguishable from experiences that God (or at least some created demi-God) could have in a dream. Since B1 and B2 are not consistent with the view that there is a God who knows whether or not "he" is presently experiencing a divine dream (or whether or not "he" is the real God or just a created demigod who has been given a dream with godlike phenomenal experiences), then arguably B1 and B2 cannot be deployed in the defense of theistic hope. My guess is that Citron might want to qualify B1 or B2 in some way that would make them inapplicable to God. But if God has some way of seeing that dream skepticism is false in God's own case, perhaps we too have some way of seeing that dream skepticism is false in our own case.

Besides the ill fit between B1/B2 and theism, I have more direct objections to the epistemological presuppositions that lie behind B2 and related claims made by Citron. Later in the paper, Citron claims something stronger than B2. Not only does phenomenal indistinguishability mean that we cannot *know* that we are not dreaming; it also means that we are not justified in thinking that the dream scenario is less probable than the standard view (which says that the lives we appear to be leading are not dreams). The key assumption that drives Citron to this conclusion may be put as follows: if two hypotheses do not differ in how likely they make evidence *E* (for example, if they both *entail E*), then in a situation where *E* is our total evidence, we are not justified in taking one of these hypotheses to be more probable than the other. (This assumption is operative in the discussion on p. 253 and 264.) Call this the "key assumption." The key assumption is at odds with standard ways that we form beliefs. For example, it is standard scientific practice to prefer a simple and elegant theory that predicts our evidence over some convoluted and ad hoc theory that also predicts our evidence. But if the key assumption is right, then the simplicity of a theory should have no bearing on its epistemic probability. The key assumption also implies that we should take all sorts of "silly" hypotheses seriously (e.g., grue-like hypotheses, hypotheses predicting massive changes in the natural laws in two days, or one hypothesis mentioned by Citron—that the universe began just five minutes ago complete with decaying buildings, beings who seem to remember long lives, etc.). Since the majority of epistemologists think we are justified in dismissing such hypotheses, they are committed to rejecting the key assumption. Of course the assumption may nonetheless be right, but Citron relies on it without much of a defense. It is perhaps more plausible that we cannot *know* that hypothesis H1 is true whenever there is some other hypothesis H2 predicts our evidence equally well (though "fallibilists" about knowledge will deny this). Since premise B2 concerns knowledge and not probability, it is more plausible than the key assumption. But in order to give us a response to the *evidential* problem of evil (and not just the logical problem), Citron needs the stronger claim about probability (and not just B2).

Suppose, however, that Citron is right and we cannot dismiss the dream scenario as improbable. And suppose further that he is right that we therefore must take seriously the possibility that no horrific suffering occurs. Would this result secure the possibility of reasonable theistic hope? I do not think so. Suppose that after reading Citron's paper, my wife begins to hope that her whole life turns out to be nothing but a dream, since if this were true then her experiences would be compatible with God's existence. As part of this larger hope, she also hopes that I and all the other people she interacts with turn out to be unreal, mere figments of her dream life. (We can suppose for the moment that she does *not* think that God's existence is compatible with what Citron calls the "massively shared dream scenario," since she thinks that massively shared dreams are one's where genuinely horrific evils can occur.) After telling me all this, my wife assures me that, while she *hopes* that I am a mere dream figment with no conscious reality, she recognizes that I may in fact be real. For this reason, she will act morally towards me, will

wholeheartedly attempt to make good on our wedding vows, and so on. Even if my wife were to succeed in acting morally to me as promised, I think that in hoping that I am a non-conscious dream figment, my wife's hopes would be grossly inappropriate. Such hope would not only amount to a disrespect of me and other persons, but it would amount to an affective disengagement from the present that would compromise her flourishing in this life (should it prove to be "real" and not merely a dream). Or consider another example. Suppose I hope that the apparent person I call my son is not my real son, since I hope that I am merely dreaming him up and that my *real* son (the son of my waking life) is even better than the "son" I appear to be interacting with. Granting that my life would be better if this were the case, and that no actual person's life would be *worse* if this were the case, it still seems that such hope betrays my son (whether he knows about it or not) and is grossly inappropriate. This suggests that it can be inappropriate to hope for some scenario even if that scenario is plausible and known to be the best case scenario (both for the person hoping as well as other actually existing individuals).

Let me now draw these reflections into an objection to Citron's view that the dream scenario helps to rationalize theistic hope. If it would be inappropriate to hope that the dream scenario is true (and inappropriate to hope for it *even if* we knew that only on this scenario is God's existence plausible), then the epistemic possibility of the dream scenario cannot help to ground reasonable theistic hope. So Citron must show not only that the dream scenario is possible (and that God's existence is therefore possible), but he must also affirm that we could appropriately hope that the dream scenario is true. But this latter claim is dubious, at least when we focus on the *right sort* of dream scenario. The right sort of dream scenario is one where the lives we appear to be living have that property P which is the property had by our nighttime dreams that explains why our dream "suffering" is insignificant (assuming that such "suffering" is indeed insignificant). Citron does not, unfortunately, tell us what P is. But I suspect that when we identify what P is, we will see that it is inappropriate for us to hope that the lives we appear to be living have property P. For example, perhaps the "suffering" of nighttime dreams is insignificant because dream suffering does not harm us in a way that significantly hinders our dealings with other conscious individuals. When in a dream my hand is sawn off (for example), nothing has happened that will compromise my plans and actions in those moments when I am interacting with conscious beings. If *this* is property P, then hoping for the right sort of dream scenario would require that I hope the people I appear to interact with are not conscious beings, and this hope seems inappropriate. Of course, maybe P will instead turn out to be some innocuous property that we could hope applies to our apparent lives without compromising the integrity of our relationships in any way. But I very much doubt this. So even if Citron has shown that theism is plausible, I do not think he has done much to advance the cause of theistic hope.

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Stephen R Ogden

While I have little space to offer substantive comments, I will not let it go without saying that Gabriel's is an incredibly insightful, inventive, and challenging piece. It is well-deserving of the APJ prize and the sustained reflection of this symposium.

One of the paper's most novel ideas is that a defense against arguments from evil can be launched by skeptically targeting the unquestioned first premise of such arguments, which

presumes horrific suffering is actual. The idea may be reduced to this: it's epistemically possible that (dream) skepticism is true, so we ought not believe there is horrific suffering (and consequently that God does not exist). However, the reason why premise A1 has usually not been questioned is because atheist, theist, and agnostic philosophers engaged in the debate have (at least implicitly) rejected global and wide-ranging skepticism. I take it that many of these philosophers do not reject the epistemic possibility of dream skepticism, but for various reasons (Moorean, contextualist, externalist, or otherwise) deny the consequent that this epistemic possibility should really undermine a majority of our knowledge, beliefs, and arguments (whether about God or other things). Gabriel offers some defense of the skeptical thesis, especially in sections 2.ii. and 5. At this point, I merely wish to point out that many will be loathe to accept a narrow defense against atheism at the cost of such a wider-scope (and arguably even more controversial) skepticism. Even in the narrow realm, since Gabriel admits that his argument equally entails that we ought not believe that God *exists* either (fn. 53), it clearly lands him in territory normally unoccupied by typical philosophers interested in defending against arguments from evil. Still, there is a certain amount of appeal in the freshness of this new ground.

Gabriel does offer at least one relevant and new reason for at least a pro-attitude toward skepticism—he says the horror of evil places an "ethical obligation to hope" that dream skepticism is true (fn. 7). This is a radical statement that does not seem to me sufficiently supported. There are all sorts of reasons to hope we have knowledge about a great many things, especially for philosophers! We could retain the hope for knowledge but accommodate some of the force of Gabriel's moral suggestion by also, for example, hoping that A3 is false—indeed, false in such a way that ultimate considerations of the evils of history will seem dream*like* in comparison with whatever morally justifying reason(s) are revealed. Furthermore, Gabriel acknowledges that "it is reasonable to think that in a dream one bears no moral responsibility at all" (268). His original claim, then, is tantamount to saying we have a moral obligation to hope we have no moral obligations. How exactly is this not self-stultifying? The very possibility of the obligation's having meaning and being met is conditional on its non-existence (see fn. 52). Along these lines, while Gabriel's remarks on "living the defense" in section 6 are keen, the life entailed seems almost schizophrenic, balanced on the knife's edge of the rational equilibrium between apparent reality (full of moral obligations) and the dream (where I have none).

I have several other worries about the self-undermining nature of the skeptical premise. According to Gabriel dream skepticism is a pure epistemic possibility, its truth and falsity entirely parallel in likelihood and worthiness of belief (264 and 269). If I have no good reasons to think I'm not dreaming, then do I have any good reasons upon which to evaluate epistemic possibility *at all*? If I can have no reasons that allow me to evaluate the likelihood of such scenarios, then why think I could accurately assess even their merely pure possibility? Gabriel's arguments in 2.i. and throughout often reason to the epistemic possibility on the basis of what is actual, as evinced in his numerous references to fascinating dream case studies. But if he is right about the force of the skeptical thesis, then we have no good reasons to think all these dreams and the ways people experience them are actual at all. Ditto for the testimonies from Nietzsche, Rumi, et al. (6.i.). This suggests that if dream skepticism is such a pure epistemic possibility, there can be no evidence in favor of it.

Finally, even if the argument's dream scenario isn't self-refuting in some way, I worry about the model's other liabilities and the great goods which it inevitably sacrifices. Many people think there are a priori, conceptual reasons that tell against a classical theistic God's being a deceiver (see fn. 31). While such people may accept that God *allows* our occasional deception, they will think it impossible that God *causes* it. Given the acceptance of a deceiver God at this

magnitude (to call it merely "temporary" ignores the massive scope of error at the present time), I wonder why Gabriel so confidently criticizes efforts to resist A3, e.g., in the comparatively milder form of skeptical theism.

The dream scenario also means that many great goods in life and in history are erased—if not from fact, then certainly from our knowledge and rational belief. I mention just two groups here (though I've already touched on knowledge and morality). While Gabriel is right that the massively shared dream scenario is a better defense than the solipsistic one (section 3), he's committed to their being equally epistemically possible (and presumably equally pure), so I have no good reasons to think my wife or children exist. Even if they do exist outside the dream, I cannot know or rightly believe I am their respective husband and father. The second great class of goods are those of particular historical religious truths (and maybe especially those that have involved suffering—e.g., God's deliverance of the Israelites from the Egyptians). Gabriel is right (fn. 57) that the argument from evil commands *anti*-theism and is thus a more negative result for theists, yet his defense still robs them of many beliefs they hold dear.

I think Gabriel is aware of certainly these last sacrifices of the defense, and, again, the paper shows how interesting a more radical, skeptical take on philosophy of religion can be.

I look forward to reading his no doubt interesting counter-objections along all of these fronts.

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Gabriel Citron

> "In January 1941 we had a 'Blitz' on Cardiff. Our house was hit by fire-bombs & all the houses around were blazing. Heavy bombs were coming down thick & fast & although I had been very frightened, I was running for water when this feeling happened. I said to myself, 'This is the end. We are all going to be killed. There is no escape. We are a sitting target.' [Then] I became detached & very calm and my fear vanished. It was all unreal and I wondered when I was going to wake up."[1]
>
> "[L]ike most climbers, I have occasionally got myself into a position in which it looks as though I shall fall, and on two occasions I have actually fallen… / [In] the first of these episodes... once it had become certain that I was going to fall… I had no feeling of fear, but only a detachment and unreality. It was through lack of finger strength that I fell, and I can remember watching my fingers uncurling from the hold as if they did not belong to me; the sensation of falling was as in a rather pleasant dream, and there was no feeling of pain on the occasions when I hit the rock. I have heard other people say much the same thing, and I think this is the common sensation."[2]

[1] Anonymous testimony, quoted in CE Green, *Lucid Dreams*, Oxford, Institute of Psychophysical Research, 1968, p. 48 (chap VI).

[2] Anonymous testimony, quoted in *ibid*, p. 49 (chap VI).

I must begin by thanking the two groups of people who have made this symposium possible. First of all, I'm very grateful to the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism – to Dani Rabinowitz, Sam Lebens, and Aaron Segal – for seeing fit to hold a symposium on my paper and for all the effort that has gone into arranging and hosting it. And secondly, I'd like to thank the three respondents – Marilyn McCord Adams, John Pittard, and Stephen R Ogden – for taking the time to read my paper with such care and for commenting on it so thoughtfully and challengingly.

I shall respond to each of the above sets of comments in separate sections that will follow. But before diving too deeply into the details, I think that it would be helpful for me to provide a bit of background to explain where I was coming from in putting forward the kind of defence that I did.

Background: unacceptable moral calculi and the problem of cosmodicy

I think that there is an urgent need for responses to arguments from evil which do not rely on the attempt to undermine what I have labelled premise A3: the claim that there is (probably) no morally justifying reason for a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient being to allow horrific suffering to occur. For all attempts to undermine this premise – whether by means of theodicies, defences, or sceptical theisms – seem to be committed to a moral calculus by which God deems some good or other (whether known to us or not) to be worth allowing the horrors that we see around us. Now, if the suffering in question were sufficiently minimal, then perhaps a God could be countenanced who consciously envisaged it, calculated the sacrifice to be worth allowing for some great good, and chose to create the world despite the bad. But given the truly horrific amount, kind, and intensity of suffering that is granted by A1 to occur, it seems to me that a God who pictured it and then chose to create such a world nonetheless – *whatever* the good for which the suffering would be a necessary condition[3] or a necessarily possible by-product[4] – could not possibly be a paradigm of unsullied moral perfection. It seems to me that the suffering that is referred to in A1-A3 is so horrific that – regardless of the projected gain from allowing it – it is absolutely morally forbidden to be complicit in it in any way[5]. And even if this moral absolute is not accepted, a God who could knowingly and willingly create a world with such suffering – when the option of simply abstaining from creating altogether was always there – must be either horrifying amoral or else torturedly tragic. He would be horrifyingly amoral if he just didn't care about the suffering for which he is (at least indirectly) responsible. And he would be torturedly tragic if he did care, but felt that he had to go ahead in choosing that sacrifice for the sake of a greater good. After all, imagining a God who is involved in this latter kind of calculation is to imagine a God with incalculably 'dirty hands' – such that even if he is counted to have done what is best overall, he could not possibly be considered 'morally innocent' or 'pure'[6]. None of these options are compatible with being perfectly good in the unsullied way that theists usually think

[3] For example in 'soul-making' theodicies and defences.

[4] For example in 'free will' theodicies and defences.

[5] At least not without the prior permission of those who will be suffering.

[6] See Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 2, 1973, pp. 160-180. Even if God did receive pre-natal permission to create the world from all future sufferers of horrors (similar to the way in which some myths imagine people choosing their bodies before birth), the problem of dirty hands would still apply. And in any case, many such sufferers have manifestly withdrawn whatever consent they may earlier have given.

relevant to God. Therefore I take A3 to be true and unassailable – and if arguments from evil are to be undermined then it must be one of the other premises that is attacked[7]. The premise I chose to attack was A1: the claim that horrific suffering occurs.

If I am to be completely honest, however, I must confess to having another reason for wanting to focus on A1 rather than on A3 or A2. Namely, that I incline to take claims about God (such as the claim that God is good) to be almost entirely reducible to claims about the world (in this case, the claim that world is good)[8]. I therefore incline to take the project of theodicy to be almost entirely reducible to that of *cosmodicy* – the attempt to show that the world is truly good[9]. Indeed, given my reductive tendencies, the project of theodicy would need to be reduced to that of cosmodicy with the latter being conducted without any essential reference to a metaphysical God. My appeal to dream-scepticism to undermine premise A1 was precisely such an attempt to provide a cosmodicy which kept within these limits[10]. Because there isn't much of a contemporary analytic literature on – or interest in – cosmodicy, I couched my discussion in theological terms in the context of standard arguments from evil directed against the existence of a metaphysical God. But at the core of my theodical defence against arguments from evil is an attempted cosmodical defence: a demonstration that for all we know the world really is a good place. Thus, when I concluded my paper by describing it as "a defense of the possibility of hope: hope that God exists, hope that goodness is not alien to the world, and hope that injustice and suffering do not have the final word, or perhaps much of a word at all" (p. 270) – it was meant to be the last three hopes which wore the trousers, and the first which followed on from them.

It is surprising to me that there is not a greater interest in cosmodicy amongst analytic philosophers generally, since we all inhabit the world – theist and atheist alike – and it seems that we all therefore probably have reason to want to know whether or not there is any way that this could be a good thing. That said, perhaps the analytic literature on the meaning of life which has

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[7] Of course, to make these points fully it would be necessary to say a great deal more than I have just said. For a more detailed discussion along similar lines see DZ Phillips' *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, London, SCM Press, 2004, pp. 33-44 (I:2:3). The above, however, should go at least some of the way towards answering Stephen's question as to why I "criticize… efforts to resist A3, e.g., in the comparatively milder form of skeptical theism" (p. 6).

[8] This does not mean that I think that God can or should be reduced to the world. I am currently working on a paper that sets out my position on this in much more detail. Its working title is: 'Objectless Intentionality and 'God' as a Dummy Noun: Religiosity and God-Talk Without Metaphysics'.

[9] As far as I can tell, the word 'cosmodicy' (or rather, the German word '*Kosmodicee*') was first coined by Erwin Rohde in a letter to Nietzsche on 6th February 1872 (*Friedrich Nietzsches Gesammelte Briefe: Zweiter Band*, p. 290 [§90]). Nietzsche adopted the term and went on to use it in a number of places shortly thereafter. See, for example, his 1872 lecture course *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* (trans Greg Whitlock, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2006, p. 64 [chap 10]), and his 1873 essay 'David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer' (in his *Untimely Meditations*, trans RJ Holligdale, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 32 [sec 7]).

[10] I mention God a number of times in the course of my argument, but I do not think that any of these mentions are essential for the setting out of a complete dream-sceptical cosmodicy defence. I should add that parallels of some of the theodicies and defences which attack premise A3 might also be acceptable bases for the kind of cosmodicy that I am interested in. For example, free-will defences and soul-making defences (if they could be made to work) could be repurposed – without mention of a metaphysical God – to generate cosmodical defences. The undermining of premise A1, however, is just the most direct way to generate one.

recently started to flourish[11] should be seen as including the question of cosmodicy within its remit.

I hope that the preceding goes some way towards explaining the thinking behind what might otherwise have seemed like a peculiar avenue to be exploring in trying to undermine arguments from evil. With that taken care of, I will now turn to Marilyn, John, and Stephen's comments, in the hope that even if I my responses will not entirely succeed in defusing their objections, they might nonetheless raise some interesting and worthwhile issues for discussion.

Response to Marilyn McCord Adams' comments

Marilyn poses a single fundamental objection to my defence, and if I understand her correctly, her argument goes something like this:

C1. If dream scepticism is plausible it shows that for all I know I may not be an actual person, as I may rather be merely a dream-person (dream scepticism does not show that for all I know my experience may not be actual experience, as it may rather be merely dream-experience).
C2. All experience is equally significant, whatever the ontological status of its subject: whether it is an actual person or a dream-person who is having it.
C3. By C2 it follows that experiences of horrific suffering are just as significant when they are experienced by a dream-person in a dream as when they are experienced by an actual person in waking life.
CC. By C1 and C3 it follows that even if dream scepticism is plausible, if I am a subject who is experiencing horrific suffering, then it is significant – despite the fact that I cannot know whether I am an actual person or a dream-person.

This is a very interesting argument, and I'm not entirely sure what I think about C1. Part of my unclarity about C1 is whether or not it entails C2. As I have set out the argument above I have laid down C1 and C2 as distinct premises so as to avoid this problem. But whatever the status of C1, it seems to me that C2 is false. I do not think that experience in dreams is as significant as experience in waking life – and I think that my doubt regarding C2 is backed up by many of our shared everyday judgements.

After all, if it were true that the undergoing of horrific suffering by dream-people was just as significant as the undergoing of parallel sufferings by waking people, then wouldn't the narratives of very bad nightmares get reported on the actual news alongside the awful crimes and disasters of the waking world that get reported as a matter of course? And wouldn't the United Nations and Amnesty International be spending just as much money and effort on a cure for terrible nightmares as they do on peace-keeping and poverty-alleviation missions? After all, if I have understood Marilyn's argument properly (and I'm not entirely sure that I have), her position entails that the suffering of every protagonist dream-person in a war-nightmare or a starvation-nightmare is just as significant as the suffering of every actual person suffering war or starvation. It seems to me that the fact that nightmares are not considered a human-rights disaster

[11] For numerous examples and references, see Joshua W Seachris (ed), *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

despite the fact that there must have been billions of war-nightmares and the like over the years, is proof that as a society we do not take C2 to be true.

In fact, if C2 were true, then this would make the problem of evil much worse than most people seem to take it to be (and perhaps therefore harder to solve). For, just as Sa'adia Ga'on, in his theodicy, holds that animals who suffer unjustly in their lifetimes will have to be recompensed in the afterlife[12]; similarly, we would need to hold that our theodicies and defences should take into account not just every actual person who has suffered, but also every distinct dream-person protagonist who has suffered. And, of course, over the years I may have had thousands upon thousands of very different nightmares, each with distinct dream-person protagonists[13]. Of course, there is nothing *absurd* about wanting to include dream-people in whatever plan God has to defeat our suffering – especially, as Marilyn points out, ontological status is relative anyway, so it is not as though actual people are incomparably different from dream-people – but I think that it is telling that I have never come across anyone actually mentioning the need for dream-people to be taken into account in these contexts.

Now, having said all this, I do grant that it is somewhat mysterious as to why exactly we *are* as blasé about the suffering of dream-people as we are. As John points out, I do not identify "that property P which is the property had by our nighttime dreams that explains why our dream 'suffering' is insignificant" (p. 4) – and indeed it is harder than one might think to put one's finger on exactly what that property is. But though I would be fascinated to have an answer to that question, I do not think that having one is necessary for the purposes of putting forward this defence. All I need rely on is the phenomenon that, as a matter of fact, when we look back at even terrible nightmares, we often simply do not count any significant suffering to have occurred – to (any aspect of) ourselves or to anyone else.

Response to John Pittard's comments

John levels three challenges to my defence, which fall into two categories: two regarding the epistemological premises of my argument for scepticism, and one regarding the upshot of my defence for theistic hope. I will try to touch on the first and third of these objections, and for want of space will have to leave John's second epistemological objection to the discussion which is to follow.

John's first epistemological objection is that my argument for dream scepticism is too strong for my purposes, because it entails that, like us, God himself could never know whether he is awake or dreaming, and this would contradict God's omniscience. Seeing as my defence is meant to defend the possibility that there is a God who is omniscient (amongst other things), this certainly seems to be a problem!

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[12] See, for example, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 175 (III:X).

[13] I should note that Marilyn talks of "the same subject" having "two ontological statuses: it can exist in reality as a real subject and/or it can exist in the dream as the dream subject" (p. 1). So perhaps she would not take there to be any extra people whose suffering needs defeating, but I'm not sure how exactly this would work (i.e. how could I be multiple people: one actual person and many thousands of seemingly very different dream-people?).

I have two quite different directions of tentative response to this objection. Unfortunately the first seems to fail and the second is likely to be very unsatisfactory to many people. Having said that, here goes…

Attempted response 1: John predicts that in response to this problem I would most likely "want to qualify B1 or B2 in some way that would make them inapplicable to God" (p. 3), thereby guaranteeing that God can know that he is awake. Actually, however, I will experiment with going in entirely the opposite direction. I would like to suggest that far from knowing that he is awake, actually, God must know *a priori* that he is dreaming – and there is nothing wrong with this because there is no reality to be contrasted with God's dreaming. That is, on this suggestion, reality simply *is* God's dream: God's dream constitutes all the reality that there is other than God (and *our* dreams are really dreams within dreams). Indeed, this is one way of making sense of the common idea, mentioned by Marilyn, that we have diminished ontological status relative to God: perhaps we are to God exactly as the inhabitants of our dreams are to us. It should not surprise us, therefore, that this position has been espoused by numerous (mostly panentheistically inclined) theologians. Thus Muḥammad ibn al-'Arabi, for example, claims that the cosmos is "the dream of the Real"[14]. And if we go along with this then it might seem that dream scepticism could not be a problem for God.

There are, however, a number of problems with this attempt to avoid John's initial objection. The most fundamental being that it seems that all God could know *a priori* is that God must necessarily be dreaming, but not that *he is God* and therefore that *he is definite dreaming*. For couldn't anyone dream that they are God and that they are dreaming reality into existence? And if so, what would differentiate that dream of dreaming reality into existence from God's reality of dreaming reality into existence? It seems that the problem, therefore, remains, and given the strength of B1 and B2, it looks as though God could not be omniscient, as he could never know if he was actually God or someone else dreaming dreams of divinity. Given this failure, I will try a completely different tack.

Attempted response 2: I said in the first section of this piece that I incline to take claims about God to be almost entirely reducible to claims about the world. If we apply a version of this reductionism to the claim that God is omniscient then I think that the problem can be avoided. I do not have a fully worked out theory of God-talk, but one direction in which I am tempted is to take a move of Maimonides' one step further than he does. Maimonides takes what seem to be statements about God's attributes, and reduces them to statements about things that God does in or to the world. I would like to reduce them one step further, to statements about things that happen in the world. Thus, Maimonides reduces 'God is wise' to 'God brought about a world which is complex and intricate' (or some such)[15], and I would like to reduce it to simply 'The world is complex and intricate' (or some such). Maybe *omni*science would be a matter of *infinite* complexity and intricacy (or some such). On this account the claim 'God is omniscient' has a plausible reduction and one that makes it true, but the claim that 'God does not know whether

[14] 'The Real' being Ibn al-'Arabi's appellation for the ultimate divine; quoted in William C Chittick, *Principles of Ibn Al-'Arabi's Cosmology: The Self-Disclosure of God*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1998, p. 60 (I:2). See also Ibn Al-'Arabi's *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans RWJ Austin, Mahwah NJ, Paulist Press, 1980, pp. 119-127 (chap IX). Samuel Lebens discusses positions like this in his 'God and His Imaginary Friends: A Hassidic Metaphysics', *Religious Studies*, August 2014.

[15] That is, God did something which, had it been done by a regular agent, would have led us to attribute the quality of wisdom to that agent (see *The Guide of the Perplexed*, vol I, trans Shlomo Pines, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 125 [I:54]).

he is awake or dreaming' has no plausible reduction and certainly not one that makes it true – therefore the problem is seen simply not to apply.

It might be worried that if, for all we know, this is merely a dream-reality, how could we know that the actual world is infinitely complex and intricate? This, however, seems like the kind of thing that we could know even from within a dream. After all, we could infer that the reality in which we are sleeping must be at least complex and intricate enough to sustain sleeping sentient beings who are able to dream.

Given my favoured account of omniscience (or at least my sketch of a certain kind of account), I feel quite comfortable more-or-less ignoring this problem as John has raised it. Of course, however, I recognise that many people will not share my account of omniscience and will therefore be left with the problem. If absolutely necessary, then, my last resort would be to withdraw from my claim to have provided a theodical defence, and retreat to the claim that what I have provided is merely a cosmodical defence – which was my principal aim in any case. I hope, however, that in our discussion others might raise some better ideas.

John's third objection is to my claim that my defence secures the possibility of reasonable hope that God exists. He points out that if he were committed to the massively unshared dream-scenario as the most plausible defence-scenario[16], then hoping that there is a God would involve hoping that his son and wife do not exist (or at least hoping that they probably do not exist). For to hope that there is a God would be to hope that this seemingly horrific world is actually a dream, and to hope that this world is a dream of the unshared variety would be to hope one's son and wife away. John insists that hoping one's son and wife do not exist is "grossly inappropriate", and therefore that it is equally inappropriate to hope that God exists – for the latter hope involves the former.

On reflection I think I must grant that John's objection here is decisive. Fortunately, however, the ramifications of this being so are limited – for the objection rests entirely on hoping that we are inhabiting the massively *un*shared dream-scenario. As I said on pp. 258-9, however, I prefer the massively *shared* dream-scenario as the defence-scenario that we should make use of. I had hoped that none of the other options I allowed would have fatal flaws, because I liked the idea that different people could choose the defence-scenario that seemed most desirable to them – but it turns out that perhaps I was a little too liberal.

The main reason people may be weary of the massively shared dream-scenario is because it might be thought that the very sharedness of the dream somehow lends reality and significance to suffering experienced and perpetrated in it[17]. This does not seem plausible to me, however. All I can do here is to repeat the thought-experiment which I described on p. 259 (fn. 27), which I find to be convincing:

> "Against the idea that suffering in shared dreams is more significant than suffering in unshared ones, consider the following case. One night I dream that I viciously attack you, and on the same night you have an exactly parallel dream in which you are viciously attacked by me. Imagine that we talk the next day and realize that we seem to have shared the same dream. Though we might find this to be rather spooky, it would be strange for me to feel guilty, for you to judge me badly, or for you to feel any the more hurt by the dream due to the fact that it was shared."

In the massively shared dream-scenario we do not hope anyone not to exist. Rather, we hope that those people who seem to be undergoing great suffering, are actually living lives in which they

[16] See section 3 of the paper for a discussion of the various available defence-scenarios.

[17] Again, we are haunted by not knowing what exactly it is about dreams that makes them so different in significance to waking life.

have not undergone it; and we hope that those people who seem to be causing terrible suffering in others, are actually living lives in which they have not done so.

Response to Stephen R Ogden's comments

Stephen raises a number of tricky problems for the defence, which – as far as I can see – fall into two broad categories. In the first set of objections he points to the various costs of accepting the scepticism involved in the defence, and suggests that they are too great to be tolerated; and in the second set of objections he points to various ways in which accepting the scepticism involved in the defence is actually self-undermining, thereby ruling out the plausibility of the scepticism in the first place. I will try to deal with the second category first, and then move back to the first.

Stephen observes that at a number of points my argument seems to undermine itself. The first example he gives is that I claim that we have a moral obligation to hope that dream-scepticism is true, and yet, if life really is a dream then we cannot really have any moral obligations. According to Stephen "[t]he very possibility of the obligation's having meaning and being met is conditional on its non-existence" (p. 5). I don't, however, think that this is the case. After all, my dream-sceptical defence allows that this world with all its attendant horrors may – unfortunately – be real. In that scenario it strikes me that it really is morally obligatory for us – if there is the slightest room for hope that the world is not real – to embrace that hope. I then argue that there is room for such hope. Of course, given that there is room for such hope it must be epistemically possible that this life is actually a dream, and if that possibility is actual, it follows that the obligation to hope that it is so will not be able to 'take'. But since my argument is not that this life is definitely a dream, rather only that it is epistemically possible that it is, it seems to me that it will always be *relevant* to take into account the possibility of an obligation to hope that it is a dream.

More than this, however, the argumentative strategy that I took in the paper was to address the reader from the position in which he or she is likely to be. Thus, since the reader is likely not to be a dream-sceptic when they start to read, I allowed myself to present considerations and arguments that I thought would be relevant and powerful to them from their point of view, but which may become less relevant – or at least more complicated – should the reader begin to be convinced. In this way I see the argumentative strategy of my paper as being analogous to Wittgenstein's in the *Tractatus*. I would thus tweak Wittgenstein's famous passage as follows:

> "My propositions serve as ~~elucidations~~ [considerations] in the following way: anyone who ~~understands me~~ [takes them to heart] eventually recognizes them as ~~nonsensical~~ [irrelevant], when he has used them – as steps – to climb beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)"[18]

I have the feeling that this response could also apply to Stephen's second example of the self-undermining nature of my argument. Namely, that I often draw on claims about what actually happens (e.g. dreams that I claim people to actually have had) as evidence in my argument that this life might not be actual; but it seems that the success of my argument would force the withdrawal of our reliance on the evidence used to prove it. That said, I'm not entirely sure that the 'Wittgensteinian strategy' properly applies here. I will, however, leave this matter here for now, and allow it to be taken up further in the discussion.

[18] With apologies to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans DF Pears & BF McGuiness, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 89 (6.54).

Moving back to Stephen's first category of objection: what *are* the costs of accepting this dream-sceptical defence against arguments from evil? Stephen implicitly describes the scepticism of my defence as "global and wide-ranging skepticism" (p. 5) which will rule out: (i) knowledge of – and even good reason to believe – an enormous number of things that philosophers (amongst other people) have sought to know; (ii) knowledge – and even good reason to believe – that our current actions have any moral significance; (iii) knowledge – and even good reason to believe – that, say, my spouse or children exist; and (iv) knowledge of – and even good reason to believe – various important historical religious claims (such as that God delivered the Israelites from Egypt). He also adds (v) that I grant that my "argument equally entails that we ought not believe that God *exists* either" (p. 5).

I am glad that Stephen included item (iv) in his list, because it gives me a chance to spell out what I consider to be an interesting consequence of my defence. Namely, that if there is a God – and if, therefore, this life with all its horrific suffering is indeed a dream – then it follows that the true religion(s) will be quite different to the way many people currently take it (them) to be. For example, it would seem that in the real world there could not have been an exodus from Egypt (because this is premised on generations of horrific Israelite suffering, and involved the deaths and suffering of many Egyptians as the Israelites left), nor could there have been a crucifixion (because this is premised on the terrible sinfulness of humanity and its attendant sufferings, and involved the horrific suffering of Jesus). I can see that many might baulk at these kinds of consequence, but I find them rather exciting and hopeful: the possibility that perhaps the magnificent edifices of our current religious systems are merely our best adaptations to this awful dream that we are undergoing, and that the true form of religion – a radically new, purer religion – a religion of good alone – awaits us when we awake…

Next I would like to take some time to discuss item (v) in Stephen's list of costs. Stephen was careful not to simply include (v) as yet another sceptical result that is derived directly from dream-scepticism – and I think that he was right in that. When I was writing the paper I suspected that one might actually be able to come to know that God exists even if one granted dream-scepticism, because – interestingly – almost all the classic arguments for God's existence actually seem to be derivable from within a dream. The ontological argument depends on *a priori* reasoning, which is perfectly available to dreamers[19]. The cosmological argument depends on *a priori* reasoning along with the claim that something (contingent) exists, and arguably this is also an *a priori* belief, or in any case it is available to dreamers by means of the *cogito* and attendant arguments. The teleological argument is *a posteriori*, but rests only on very general premises – such as the complexity and order of the world – which I have already mentioned in the previous section, would be available to dreamers. Indeed, it even seemed to me that a committed dream-sceptic could embrace an argument from religious experience, for even non dream-sceptics take many relevant religious experiences to occur in dreams (such as certain classes of visions and prophecies). Thus it is not obvious to me that dream-scepticism of itself rules-out many of the traditional paths to rational belief in God, or knowledge of God's existence.[20]

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[19] Indeed, all kinds of mathematic discoveries have been made in dreams (for references to a number of examples see Sam Keenan, 'Combining Kuhn and Jung: outlining a 'step ladder Model' (SLM) for scientific discovery and paradigm shift research', *International Journal of Jungian Studies*, 7:3, 2015, pp. 209-10).

[20] All this is reasonable if we follow Descartes in thinking that dream-scepticism does not affect our reasoning capacities (see René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, [A Latin-English Edition], trans John Cottingham, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 27 [First Meditation]). But seeing as we do sometimes have dreams in which we seem to ourselves

However, it seemed to me that I must rule out belief in God's existence[21] for quite different reasons. That is, I was concerned that if someone positively believed in the existence of God, and believed that this dream-sceptical defence was the only way to avoid arguments from evil against God's existence, then by working my argument backwards they could plausibly derive from this that this life is *definitely* a dream. But if they did that, they may consider themselves entirely unbound by the strictures of morality – and this struck me as a scary thought. Consider the following dream report by Embury Brown, from 1934:

> "I see a boy in the kitchen, then a man. How did they get in with all the doors locked? Then with some elation I discern: 'It's a dream; now I can experiment.' I remember that I have thought, among other things, of trying murder in a lucid dream, and so I attempt to tear the boy limb from limb, but I cannot make the least impression on his body with my hands. The experiment is distasteful and I desist. I pass into an unfamiliar room, a kind of woodshed with a pit seven feet deep in the center. A man sits on the steps that lead into the pit. At first he is our friend the Rev. Mr. ---, but later he is more like a young hobo. I tell him he must be hanged. There is a noose dangling on the opposite side of the pit, and an apparatus for winding it up. I find myself precariously poised aloft, trying to adjust the rope. I draw down what I adjudge to be a sufficient length and then descend to the rim of the pit. 'You are about to enter the next world', I tell the young man. Again I feel an aversion to continuing the experiment, but reflect that it is certainly a dream, and can do no real harm, while it may be both interesting and informative if carried out."[22]

The report goes on to describe the various ways in which Brown tried – but eventually failed – to kill the young man. It would certainly not be a good result of my defence to see this kind of 'experimental behaviour' result from the combination of reading my paper along with some persuasive proofs of God's existence!

Importantly, my defence is not alone in threatening these rather scary antinomian consequences. This is a fascinating and profound problem that is shared by many responses to arguments from evil – though each will hit upon it in a different way. For in attempting to undermine the significance of suffering as a threat to God's existence, the significance of moral action almost always seems to end up as collateral damage. For example, consider the following brief statement by Richard Swinburne of the core of his theodicy:

> "[O]f each... [moral and natural evil] it is the case that by allowing it to occur God makes possible a good which he could not otherwise make possible without allowing it (or an equally bad state) to occur. Every moral evil in the world is such that God allowing it to occur makes possible (given the assumption that humans have free will) the great good of a particular choice between good and bad. Every bad desire facilitates such a choice. Every false belief makes possible the great good of investigation, especially cooperative investigation, and the great good of some of us helping others towards the truth. Every pain makes possible a courageous response (in all except animals caused to respond badly, and humans who do not yet realize what is the good response), and normally the goods of compassion and sympathetic action."[23]

The problem with this is that if, for example, every pain makes possible a courageous response, and if this possibility is so valuable that it justifies God in allowing people to suffer pain, it is not

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to reason very logically, but upon waking, we realise that our reasoning had been bizarre and utterly unreasonable, perhaps dream-scepticism ought to disallow that we can come to know that God's existence by means of rational proof.

[21] See pp. 269-70, and especially fn 53.

[22] Quoted in Celia Green and Charles McCreery, *Lucid Dreaming: The Paradox of Consciousness During Sleep*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 103 (chap 9).

[23] Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. 217-8 ('Conclusion to Part III').

at all clear why I too should not be able to allow or to inflict pain on people. After all, according to Swinburne, pain makes for the possibility of a greater good that would not otherwise have been possible – and why should I not embrace *imitatio dei* in the facilitation of such great goods in others? Thus, by providing a theodicy to show that suffering is not as significant a threat to God's existence as it seems, the significance of the distinction between morally good and bad actions has been weakened. All action turns out to be good – either because it is directly good, or because it is bad and therefore a facilitation of even greater good.

A parallel problem arises for 'sceptical theists' who claim that we have reason to think that we would not be in a position to know God's morally justifying reasons for allowing or causing suffering. The problem with this is that to the degree that there are potentially unknown values in suffering, one might worry that we should not want to prevent it or avoid causing it. This kind of sceptical defence seems to invite moral paralysis, because we can never be sure which actions (apparently good or apparently bad) will *actually* be of the greatest value or lead to the greatest good. A burgeoning literature has been developing around this problem[24].

My response to the looming antinomian problem, when writing the paper, was to conclude that we oughtn't commit to the existence of God – and that this agnosticism is not so hard to achieve, especially as it is not too hard to find problems with the various arguments for God's existence, if one is inclined (not to say determined) to do so.

This finally brings us back to Stephen's original challenge. Namely: is the acceptance of my defence worth the sacrifice of knowledge – and even of having good reason to believe – that God exists and the other four classes of thing that he lists?

In response to this I will not deny that the cost of accepting my dream-sceptical defence is very steep. It's just that it seems to me that the price is more than worth paying. If the rejection of premise A3 had not been ruled out then I could see why the price of dream-scepticism might seem too high. But once we have renounced all attempts to claim that God could possibly have morally justifying reasons for allowing the horrors that we see all around us, then it looks as though dream-scepticism might be the cheapest price available for the possibility of the existence of a perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient God.

Let's also think about this from a non-theistic perspective, for a moment – from the point of view of the project of cosmodicy. Given all the truly heinous evils and horrendous sufferings that abound in this world, it seems almost impossible to resist the conclusion that this is nothing other than hell. Not for everyone, certainly, but for vast hordes of people and animals over the course of a blood-drenched, terror-filled, guilt-racked history. When confronted by this, how could one fail to despair?! And yet, we are offered a small sliver of hope… Perhaps none of this has really happened, perhaps a clean slate is still available, perhaps this is all just a terrible dream! Isn't *any* price – especially merely epistemic ones – worth the possibility of a hope like that?[25]

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[24] See Michael J Almeida & Graham Oppy, 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81:4 (December 2003), pp. 496-516, and the ensuing responses, counter-responses, and discussions.

[25] I'd like to thank Sol Goldberg for discussing some of these issues with me (and for [re-]coining the wonderful word 'cosmodicy'!).